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President Shelly Meets with U.S. House Appropriations Committee Staff to Keep ONHIR

LUEPP, Ariz. – Navajo Nation President Ben Shelly joined members of the Navajo Hopi Land Commission Thursday as they met with U.S. House of Representative Committee on Appropriations staff on the proposed defunding of the federally-funded Office of Navajo-Hopi Indian Relocation (ONHIR).

"If Congress shuts down ONHIR, then our Navajo families ought to move back to Hopi Partitioned Lands," President Shelly said. "If they can't fund us, we will allow our people to go back from where they were chased off. We'll have to re-do the relocation policy all over again. ONHIR can do a 638 with BIA."

"Our Navajo families rights' are being violated. We need a House committee to come here and look into this," President Shelly added.

The president read from a letter he wrote to Congress on the proposed defunding of ONHIR. "Not funding this program will deprive hundreds of Navajos the benefit and due process that they are entitled to under the law," the president reiterated to the House staff.

"The Navajo Nation has hundreds of families who are still awaiting their relocation benefits," President Shelly stated. "To base a funding decision on the statements of a now non-impacted party is flawed rationale for action."

The House Appropriations Interior bill for fiscal year 2014 proposes to 'zero out' funding for the Office of Navajo-Hopi Indian Relocation. By federal law, the power to terminate the office rests with the United States president. Congress can effectively close the office by defunding ONHIR.

The Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, one of 12 subcommittees on appropriations, ordered a study to be conducted by the General Accountability Office.

More than 200 Navajo families are awaiting relocation benefits, and another 350 are appealing denials by the federal relocation office in Flagstaff, Ariz. More appeals may be filed for some 2,000 denied applications for relocation benefits.

The Navajo-Hopi Land Commission still has some 400,000 acres of land to put into trust under the 1980 amendment to the Settlement act passed originally made into law in 1974. There are more than 9,000 acres of land the Navajo-Hopi Land Commission is needs to select and purchase under the Settlement Act, incumbent on congressional funding.

The House staff acknowledged the President Shelly's statements at the meeting, and responded that they will return to Washington, D.C. with information and testimony they received from the Navajo Nation leadership, and individuals affected by relocation.

"It is up to the appropriators to make the decisions," the House staff acknowledged.

In April, President Shelly testified before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on the Interior for fiscal year 2014, which begins Oct. 1, 2013. His testimony emphasized more vibrant self-sustained tribal economies, tribal consultation on the sequestration, empower infrastructure costs, and tax incentives for private industry development.

The Hopi tribal leadership offered testimony at the April House Appropriations Subcommittee hearing to "close" ONHIR. Relocation for Hopi families was completed in 2011.

Congress is currently in recess and will return on Sept. 3. They are expected to resume debates on the 12 annual appropriation bills. Appropriation amounts of proposed spending that differ between the House and Senate will be conferenced by both houses.

"If Congress passes the appropriation bill to zero out funding for ONHIR, we still have President's Obama's veto power we can pursue." President Shelly said.

Council Delegate Walter Phelps, who serves on the Navajo-Hopi Land Commission, and Raymond Maxx, director for commission, joined President Shelly.

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